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ABSTRACT

A case study of parental involvement in a seventh grade interdisciplinary activity, called "International Fair," at a Middle School is described and interpreted. The International Fair, the culmination of the work of student groups, involved students preparing booths representing the cultures of different countries and dressing up in costumes of those countries. Based on two years of observations, interviews, and document analysis, the effects of parental involvement on the Fair are described. Parents, mainly through complaints, attempted to influence the outcome of the Fair by changing the scope of content, the assignments, the grading basis, and the goals of the activity. During the second year of the study, the teachers increased their influence over the Fair and reduced the likelihood of parent over-involvement and competitiveness with one another in the Fair by (1) organizing an information meeting; (2) reducing the competition by eliminating the trophies; and (3) tightening up the rules so parents would not play a major role in setting up booths before the Fair. By improving their communication of expectations to parents, teachers hoped to increase parent enlistment in curriculum-supportive roles. Role and goal differences between teachers and parents and supportive, activist, and partnership-oriented parent involvement in the curriculums are discussed and interpreted. Contains 13 references. (AS)

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ED 407 126

Parent Involvement and Curriculum-Making: Cooperation and Conflict With Teachers in a Middle School

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Abstract

This paper describes and interprets a specific case of parental involvement in an extensive middle school interdisciplinary activity, "International Fair," using a two-year case study based on observations, interviews, and document analysis. Interpretations are made in light of alternative theoretical perspectives, as well as the local school's historical, social, and political context of restructuring over four years. Parents take an activist role in attempting to change particular aspects of the activity, but in the end boundary maintenance by the teachers to insure their professional prerogatives leads to rejection of the parents' concerns. Interpretations center around differences between parents and teachers about educational goals, as well as teachers' and researcher's views "explaining" reasons for and nature of parent involvement.

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Alternative Conceptions of Parent Involvement

Parents' involvement in their children's schools is espoused by many as a process to be encouraged whenever possible. It has become a central ingredient of school restructuring frameworks. For example, the Coalition of Essential Schools (1993) sets forth in the seventh of their nine Common Principles: "...parents should be treated as essential collaborators". Middle schools undergoing restructuring are exhorted to involve parents through meaningful roles in building-level governance groups, communication, and support of children's learning processes at home (Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, 1989, p. 67).

Few opposing voices are heard, although Casanova (1996) warns that there are negative outcomes possible through the competition and conflict often accompanying parental involvement. She argues that there is a "delicate balance" between teachers and parents, both groups believing more in their own competence to educate children than in the others'. She asserts:

> ...an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust is likely to increase competition for the control of student learning between these two groups of influential adults. A strained relationship can only lead to a concomitant decrease in productive relationships between parents and teachers to the detriment of students. (p. 32)

There is a range of perspectives about how and for what purposes parent involvement should take place. One important stance is that it should be aimed at improving student learning, mainly through home to school communication and support of learning at home. Epstein's typology includes six categories:

Type 1: Basic obligations of families including parenting skills and home conditions for learning at each age and grade level;

Type 2: Basic obligations of schools including school-to-home and home-to-

school communications about school programs and children's progress;

Type 3: Volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support the school and students;

Type 4: Involvement of families in learning activities at home;

Type 5: Participation by families in decision making, governance, and advocacy;

Type 6: Collaborations with community groups and agencies to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. (Epstein 1993, pp. 710-711)

All but the 2nd and 5th categories have to do with supportive parent activities, and the 2nd has to do with school responsibilities in the school-parent communication process. Epstein's 5th type puts parents in a direct participation role in school decision-making (and was not included in her earlier 1987 work). This overall conception of parent involvement puts parents in a role in which they mainly are partners--supporting and deferring to school professionals, while trying to foster learning and achievement of their children.

A contrasting view is that of Davies (1987) who contends that dissatisfaction with schools, calls for reform, and attempts at restructuring bring with them a different goal, and increased levels, of parental involvement. Davies's four categories includes a relatively passive one that incorporates almost all of Epstein's: "coproduction...refers to those activities...in school or at home, that contribute to school efforts to instruct pupils more effectively and raise student achievement" (p. 148). His other three categories--decision making, citizen advocacy, and parent choice--emphasize active, and sometimes contentious, roles in which parents attempt to bring about change in schools both for their own children individually, and students more generally.

In his recent work Sarason (1995) argues that issues of principle and power underlie the

recent upsurge of concern over parent involvement. His "political principle" justifying parent involvement is that "...when decisions are made affecting you or your possessions, you should have a role, a voice in the process of decision making" (p. 19). Like Fine (1993) and Davies, Sarason views parent involvement as an issue of power, where parents have less power than professional educators; it will necessarily lead to conflict with expressions of "...resentment, anger, and militancy" (p. 21).

Fine frames her arguments about parent involvement within an urban school reform picture, asserting that parents are an example of an "exclusion" from democratic discourse in the public sphere of schools. Parents aren't treated as equals and therefore lack power; school bureaucracies shun parents' diverse views and critique; parents find their private interests--in their own children--overshadowed by school staff's more abstract discussions of the common good (1993, pp. 683-684). She concludes that avoiding issues of power differences or assuming equality of parents and school staff has undermined "real educational transformation" (p. 684).

Teachers and administrators in schools have long tried to avoid open conflict with parents. Swap (1993) argues that parents "...inevitably introduce conflict into the schools and thereby create distress and defensiveness," and that schools have developed successful--often ritualistic--strategies that avoid or reduce contact and conflict with parents. Lightfoot has shown this to have been a pattern since colonial times (1978). In the context of the school in which the present study is framed, I have characterized educators' efforts to keep parents at a distance in what they believe to be matters within their professional prerogatives as a process of "boundary maintenance" (Ehman 1995b).

Four models of home-school relationships are traced by Swap (1993), including the

protective, or delegation model, whose main purpose is to reduce conflict through separation of parent and school functions. The second, school-to-home transmission model, encompasses most of Epstein's six types, where a deferential fostering of students' achievement by parents is mainly defined and sanctioned by those professionals working in schools. Parents "...play a supportive and subordinate role" (Swap 1993, 30). Swap labeled her third model "the curriculum enrichment model." Its goal is "...to expand and extend the school's curriculum by incorporating into it the contributions of families" (1993, 38). Here an assumption is that parents can work as equals with teachers, possessing expertise and useful resources to strengthen curriculum and instruction. However, as Swap points out, this model has been resisted by educators whose core professional identity is based on their special experience and insights into curriculum and instruction. These unique aspects of their professionalism are threatened and devalued by parent involvement in curriculum-making.

Finally, Swap argues for a fourth, emerging "partnership model" in which there is mutual respect and trust, long-term commitment, and widespread parent involvement in schooling. It reaches beyond curriculum and encompasses many other elements of school life and governance, and its underlying assumptions and goals correspond to positions articulated by Fine, Davies, and Sarason.

Thus, from the research and rhetoric on parent-school relationships over the past two decades, three distinct interpretations regarding parental involvement emerge: Epstein's collaborative, partnership building view; and an adversarial "parents' rights" view, in which questions about power, authority, and control necessarily dominate, argued by Davies, Fine, and Sarason. In some ways Swap's fourth "partnership model" represents a synthesis of the first two.

Methods and Data Sources

This two year investigation employed a case study method, in which I spent the entire 1993-94 school year attending classes, meetings, and other school activities, including six monthly meetings of the PTO, 19 weekly meetings of the "Parent Council" group, and many other meetings involving parents. I spent three days each week in the school, for a total of 110 days. During the 1994-95 year I continued school visits on a twice a month schedule, and attended nine Parent Council meetings from September 1994 through January 1995. My last visit occurred in May, 1995.

For the first half year, I depended mainly on observation and informal conversation with parents, students, teachers, and administrators; during the second half, I added audio taped interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and students; and throughout the period I amassed hundreds of relevant documents. While data were collected from many venues involving parent involvement, I focus this analysis on one seventh grade activity, "International Fair", because it was such a central event and actively appealed to parent involvement. I analyzed all the relevant material for persisting themes, issues, and critical incidents, going back and forth between the emerging categories and concepts in my data, and the literature containing theory and research on parent involvement.

What is this a case <u>of</u>? Wolcott (1998, p. 203) points out that this question always has to be addressed somehow in case study research. In this paper I have singled out Yorkton Middle School's International Fair[1] as the core of a "case" of parent curricular involvement. There were

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[1]"Yorkton", "International Fair", and other place, organization, and personal names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

many other instances of parents participating in this school's curriculum and instruction, mainly with individual parents working as volunteers in classrooms and other settings. I observed parents involved in all these situations, but it was during International Fair in which they were most widely engaged, sometimes in groups rather than as individuals, in a single, focused activity.

It is important to note that this case focusses much attention on parents' complaints about and efforts to change aspects of schooling at Yorkton they believed wrong. However, there was much parental positive opinion and support for the school's principal, teachers, and curriculum. I have not highlighted this support in the present case, but note it here as broad but diffuse. The case of International Fair, with its parent concerns and conflict over some practices should not be taken as a "balanced" snapshot of all parent views and actions.

My description and interpretation below represent mainly the teachers' perspective at Yorkton. While I observed, talked to, and interviewed parents and students during my study there, my data admittedly reflect an orientation toward teachers partly because of the relative amount of data from teacher settings, and partly because my role as participant observer was positioned more in relation to teachers than either parents or students. I strove to understand the phenomenon through the eyes of parents and students, and in some measure I believe I was successful; yet I found myself identifying mostly with the teachers as I interpreted the data.

Yorkton Middle School

The school was the only middle school (grades 6-8) in a relatively affluent, rapidly growing, ethnically homogeneous Midwestern community of 25,000.[2] There were 1,350 students and just under 80 certified faculty and administrators. With the principal and her superintendent in their second and third years during the study, the school was involved in planning and implementing several restructuring moves. These included formation of interdisciplinary teams of teachers, responsible for between 110 and 135 students, operating autonomously within a bell-free block schedule. Also, at the beginning of the study, the school "detracked" the curriculum (except in mathematics), eliminated their honors program, and moved to include most special needs students in regular classrooms. During the year previous to the study the principal formed a "Parent Council" of 13 parents to serve as "essential collaborators."

The seventh grade teachers were organized into three teams (expanded to four teams in the 1994-95 school year) involving four teachers each, plus occasional participation by foreign language and special education teachers. While the seventh teachers met occasionally in subject matter meetings, and once a month as a whole seventh grade teacher group, the interdisciplinary teams met most regularly--each day for 45 minutes during a regularly scheduled time.[3]

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[2]During the 1996-96 school year a new high school was occupied in Yorkton; in order to avoid building a needed new elementary school, it was decided to move the 5th grades from the five existing elementary buildings to the old middle school and house only 5th and 6th grades there; the old high school building was then used for 7th and 8th grades.

[3]For a description and analysis of teaming at Yorkton, see Ehman, L. (1995a).

International Fair at Yorkton Middle School

This case study focuses on a mid-March, seventh grade event, called "International Fair." This popular activity had been conducted for nearly ten years. During the second semester, work of the seventh grade teacher and student teams of three or four culminates in a day and evening in which booths representing different countries are viewed by other students, teachers, and parents from the school, as well as students and parents from surrounding schools[4]. While touted as "interdisciplinary, the social studies teachers on each team take the leadership roles in International Fair, with the other teachers in secondary roles, contributing related assignments and other support. The booths contain information, artifacts, and food from the countries, and appropriately costumed students. The information displays are intended to reflect cross-disciplinary study of the countries, merging social studies, mathematics, language arts, fine and practical arts (home economics) and science in the depiction of a society. Booths are judged by 6th and 8th grade teachers and ten trophies awarded to the top-ranked booths.

I now turn to a description of curriculum elements of International Fair in which parent involvement became salient.

Forming Student Teams. The three teacher teams varied slightly in how they formed student teams. Typically, each social studies teacher asked students to rank ten countries they wished to work on. The teachers used these lists to assemble groups of three or four students of differing

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[4]During the March, 1994 International Fair, approximately 3,000 students from surrounding schools were bussed in and toured the booths during the day, and over 2,000 parents and Yorkton students attended during the evening part of the Fair.

ability levels. (I noted that most groups were either all-girl or all-boy.)

Many students wished to work with their friends rather than being placed in what they viewed as arbitrary groups. Some mothers agreed, believing the groups would function more smoothly, and accomplish better results, if they had children who already got along and whose parents knew each other. The teachers, however, refused to alter groups' composition, because one of their key goals for International Fair was building abilities and experience in group problem-solving, including conflict resolution and trust-building resulting from having to depend upon group members from outside their closest group of friends.

Assignments. The seventh grade teachers had worked out over the past two years a 17-item list of specific assignments relating to the International Fair.[5] Each assignment had its own scheduled due date, with the first two ("write letters seeking information about your country from Foreign Representative and others sources"; "seek a pen pal") due in late November, and the last ("pass a test about your country") required two days after the actual event in mid-March. The assignment list was given to students during October, and was sent home to parents in the form of team newsletters. Most assignments involved social studies, but there were a habitat diorama and climate data required from science, as well as art artifacts, food preparation, and letter writing from other subjects.

Grading Student Work. Most grading was done by the social studies teacher, although the main

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[5]See Appendix A for the complete list with due dates.

report was graded separately by language arts and social studies teachers. The science habitat diorama was graded by the science teacher[6], and letters soliciting information about the countries were graded by the language arts teacher. Grades earned on the assignments were credited equally to each student in their groups[7], which was problematic with some parents (but not, with one exception I discovered, with the students themselves). Booth judging (by non-7th grade teachers) was independent of assignment grading.

Financing International Night. A lot of money was needed to carry out International Night. Centralized expenditures included provision for security, purchases of trophies, extensive entertainment (ranging from Scottish bagpipers to an Egyptian belly dancer), and other expenses, such as more than $100 worth of duct tape! These expenses, about $2,600 in 1994, were covered by admission tickets and the PTO.

More important for parent involvement were individual booth expenses. I found expenses for the booths ranged from $15 to over $200. The teachers urged students to spend as little as possible; some teachers examined each group's expense budget. Parents and students were permitted to "claim" up to $10 for expenses to be repaid out of money taken in from selling food or game chances in the booths. On the other hand, while some parents expressed concern over having to shell out extra money for booth creation, other insisted on spending considerable

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[6]One of the three science teachers refused to assign or grade this project in his class, causing friction between he and his social studies teacher teammate.

[7]One exception I discovered was a science teacher who gave differentiated grades for some dioramas, where she believed one or more students did not contribute equally to the work. This caused complaints of inconsistency from parents as well as her colleagues.

money to make the booths attractive and polished. In some cases parents showed their concern over the competitiveness of their childrens' booths through spending time--and money--on constructing them, at times causing the children to feel pushed to the side. This, too, was a contentious matter between some parents and teachers.

The Booths. There were about 110 booths set up in the school's two large gymnasiums and the cafeteria. Each was given an equal allotment of space[8], and students (with their parents' help) had about three hours on the evening prior to the formal International Fair day, plus the morning of that day, to assemble them. I documented the China booth[9] in some detail, and here is its description from my field notes:

> Black paper backdrop held by large 10' x 8' photo display frame. 6 colored paper lanterns hung from cross-member.
>
> On the backdrop, the following posters:
>
> Flag
> World map with China in red
> General ethnic composition of China (map with key)
> Collage
> Time line of history
> Major cities of China (labeled map)
> Employment of labor force (pie chart)
> Leading rice producing countries (vert bar graph)

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[8]There were a couple of squabbles between parents and teachers over booths designed for more space than available. The parents won, gaining more than their share for their childrens' booths. There was also one dispute over the location of a booth, where the parents wished to occupy a more desirable place. Again, the parents prevailed, much to the consternation of some teachers.

[9]I choose China because it was an attractive booth, although there were many comparable to it. I did not know at the time I described it that it would win one of the ten trophies for best booth.

China's religions (horizontal bar graph)
"Welcome" banner -- computer-generated

Flanking backdrop--Chinese costumes on hangers

On side table--newspapers

On the main table:

Diorama of Great Wall
3 wooden figures
3 dolls
$ conversion poster
ABC's of China Report (See below for contents)
Chinese reverse painting on class (on one side of table)
Embroidered picture (on other side of table)
"China Reference Book"
Travel magazines
"Conversational Chinese" book
Comic section of newspaper--Peanuts cartoon
Rice bowl with rice and chopsticks
A game
Framed display of paper money.

Topics for the ABC report: (P) indicates picture with text

Agriculture	P
Beijing	P
Climate	P
Dynasties	P
Education	P
Food	P
Great Wall	P
Health Care	
Industry	P
Jade carving	
Kulun Mtns	P
Language	P
Mt. Everest	P
Nationalities	
Opera	P
Population and Ethnic groups	
Qing Zang Plateau	
Religion	P
Silk	P
Trade	P
Universities	
Vegetation	P
Wuhan	P

Xinjaing Uygun
Ying and Yang
Zhouo Dyansty

They told me the pictures were hard to find, but got most of them from the National Geographic.

The three girls were dressed in full costume, with big makeup--Amy Andersen, Leslie Hinson, and Terri Martin, from Henry Lawson's [social studies teacher's] team.

The father of one of the booth's girls, Mr. Andersen, had brought two large art prints, but there was no room to display them. We talked for a bit; he told me he had been to Hong Kong, Singapore, etc., where his factories manufacture consumer electronics. He's going to China next week.

After he left, another mother/teacher came by the booth with 4 little kids. She looked at the booth displays, and commented that "most of the population of China is non-religious--I didn't know that!" Then the mother asked if they had a picture of the Great Wall in addition to the diorama, and they showed her the picture in their ABC report. She thumbed through the report, looking mainly at the pictures, while talking and showing the report to her four kids.

I asked the three what unusual things they'd learned about China while doing the project, and they all chimed in with various items:

Eat rats and dogs;
You get nosebleeds when you eat too much rat;
They have restaurants just for eating rats'
It has the largest population--they rattled it off for me;
It's the 3rd largest in area;
Most are non-religious;
Famous for jade carving;
They invented silk spinning.

I asked about what science and math there was; they pointed to the numbers in the "pronunciation guide" and pointed to the rice production graph regarding science.

None had traveled to the far east.

They were playing a tape with China music they'd bought.

They hadn't kept track of how much they'd spent on the booth--perhaps $30 or

$40.

> I asked about parent help. Parents had loaned and set up the photo display frame. A parent had made a bowl of rice, and others loaned "artifacts" like the dolls and clothing. But they insisted they'd done almost all the work, and got nearly all the materials from home. They had borrowed a display of paper money from someone else. They'd used a computer at home to make a banner and word processed text in the report.

A few parents worked alongside their children in the booths, helping with food and other details. Some even participated in the explanations provided to visitors to the booths, in spite of the clear understandings communicated by teachers that this aspect of International Fair was the students' responsibility solely. In one case I read evidence of parents "taking over" a booth to the extent that some students felt pushed out completely. In evaluations written by students the day after the Fair, one question asked: "Did everyone stay at the booth during the school day and share in giving information to people?" In response, a student wrote:

> ...Mary's mom did a lot of that, and they didn't have room for all of us...because of Mary's mom. Mary's mom did a lot. I was not able to stay a lot. I started getting nervous.

Another booth, in which Pat Smith, a Parent Council member, was a parent, was observed by teachers to be another example of this problem. While debriefing the Fair on the following day, a team of 7th grade teachers talked about Pat Smith being "bossy and hateful" to students as well as teachers, and hearing student complaints about her overbearing attitude and constant presence. One teacher commented, "...she was just showcasing the trip her family had taken to [the country depicted by the booth]."

Thus, not only did parents contribute their time and money to outfitting and constructing the booths, some actually took on the information presenting role intended by teachers to be

occupied only by students. These small examples lead us to a more general consideration of parents' participation.

Parent Involvement in the International Fair

As can be gathered from the description of these aspects of the International Fair, some parents played important roles, including the collection and paying for materials. These activities fall into the "supportive" categories explained by Epstein and others referred to above. In a broader, and more activist context, though, there was parent involvement through communicating and discussing general curricular expectations and grievances toYorkton's teachers and administrators. This phenomena is closer to the adversarial "parents' rights" view of Davies, Fine, and Sarason. It is to this aspect of parent involvement in International Fair that I now turn.

The teachers invited parents to participate and support the International Fair, depending up them to contribute their energy and resources to its educational success. While the teachers welcomed parents' efforts in working with their children in this activity, however, the teachers' control over group composition, consistency of assignments and grading, as well as some parents' competition for status and booth awards, lead to differences and sometimes open conflict[10].

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[10]The conflict was not confined to parent-teacher issues. The scope, pressures, and within-school dynamics of International Fair stressed the 7th grade teachers, leading to disagreements, arguments, and public fights between individuals on the same teams, as well as across teams. It impacted other grade levels as well. One of the four 8th grade teacher teams voted to boycott International Fair. It was customary for all social studies teachers to devote their class session to reviewing booths during the day of the Fair. For reasons not fully understood by me, this 8th

Yorkton's Parent Council. In order to understand the way parents' voiced their concerns to teachers, it is necessary to sketch the functioning of a special parent group, the Parent Council.[11]

During Molly Kramer's first year as principal she and her staff laid the groundwork for the actual changes implemented in the subsequent 1993-94 school year--interdisciplinary team teaming, detracking, and inclusion of special needs students. One of the moves she made was to form the Parent Council, partly because of the expectations set forth in the "Nine Common Principles" of the Coalition for Essential Schools, partly because the state required some form of "site-based council," and partly from concern over the negative perceptions of the school by many parents revealed in a 1990 state pre-accreditation survey. The work of this Parent Council was not all smooth through its first year of existence.

There was substantial debate within the group, and in the community at large, about the changes being planned in Yorkton Junior High. There was a particularly passionate outcry by a "gifted parents"[12] element about the planned elimination of the honors program and tracking generally. Many public meetings were held to discuss this and other proposed changes. During

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grade team decided to forgo this part of the school's culture. Teachers throughout the school commented on this action, and the 7th grade teachers took sharp exception to it. I saw the least conflict among students, although there were a couple of those instances evident to me when two days after the Fair students rated themselves and others on contributions to their groups.

[11]I describe this group much more fully in Ehman (1995b), from which this section is drawn.

[12]The term "gifted parents" was a somewhat derisive term invented by teacher and parent proponents of the elimination of honors and tracking.

the February, 1993 the Parent Council wrote a formal "vision statement" in which they supported the directions being taken by the school staff. Agreement on this statement was substantial but not unanimous, and members from the group at that time report sharp conflict. Echoes from that dissention reverberated in subsequent years' meetings of the Parent Council, and in the present case of the International Fair.

The 1993-94 school year ushered in formal acknowledgment that the school had become a middle school. Its name was changed at the same time the staff instituted a new block schedule, interdisciplinary teacher teams, elimination of the honors program, and inclusion of most special needs students. While still bursting at its seams (the building by now needed nine portable classrooms to accommodate its more than 1,300 students and nearly 100 total staff), the school became smaller psychologically to the teachers and students; teams rather than grade levels or academic departments became their primary reference points. Teams operated somewhat autonomously within the block schedule, and adopted their own rules and activities. While not all teachers or students endorsed the changes wholeheartedly, there was general excitement and energy put into making the new arrangements work.

Some members of the Parent Council opposed the changes, although the majority supported them. During the 1993-94 year, meetings of the group continued to reflect deep divisions among parents about the nature, intents, and wisdom of detracking, teaming, and the middle school philosophy represented in the Coalition's Nine Common Principles. A vocal faction of the group lobbied hard to reverse these directions, bringing in a plethora of anti-change arguments, anecdotes, and materials; much of this seemed to stem from the literature from a confederation of politically conservative organizations, with attacks centering on what were often

labeled as attempts by schools to build "outcomes-based education."

The influence of these Parent Council dissenters was felt in several specific ways throughout the 1993-94 and following years. One important decision they helped to bring to a head was to withdraw from formal affiliation with the Coalition of Essential Schools, and not to seek continued restructuring funding from the state department of instruction. Parent Council dissenters argued that by following the state department restructuring planners and the Coalition's leadership, the school was abdicating local control over education. Control over schools was the community's prerogative, they argued, and not that of the state or federal government, about whose motives they were deeply skeptical. These arguments and actions by some individuals in the Parent Council were not the only factor in the administration's decision to reverse their course, but they were important; had they not surfaced, the school might well still be receiving state restructuring support and be affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Parent Council's Complaints About International Fair. By the late fall of 1993-94 the Parent Council had funneled enough parent complaints about various school practices and incidents that they had invented a "Parent Council Concern Form" used to document the complaint and communicate it formally to the principal, Molly Kramer. This gave her some breathing room in which to check facts and prepare a response for the subsequent Parent Council meeting, something she lacked earlier in the year when complaints, some unfounded, were placed on the table during the meetings with parents' expecting her immediate response and rectification.

Parents' concerns about the International Fair had been mounting during January and February 1994, with two Parent Council members becoming especially vocal critics. Finally,

during the week before the Fair, a "Concern Form" was brought to Molly Kramer, who shared it with the 7th grade social studies teachers. The form had a standard entry for listing the source ("Person Inquiring") of the complaint; on this particular form was written in: "Many".[13] The specifics of the Concern Form are reproduced here verbatim:

1. Too much homework along with Fair requirements. From all teachers on the teams. Not even weekends free to do all this work.

2. Grading -- Project should be graded individually not as a group. Way too many groups have one or two members doing all the work for entire group. Peer pressure does not work at this age.

3. Kids from different teams getting different info on what is required and what isn't. Maybe a parent meeting in late fall or early January to inform and answer questions would help.

4. The Fair is getting <u>way</u> out of hand. Too elaborate, too much parents have to do, too expensive, <u>too much for 12/13 yr. olds to have to do by themselves, too many requirements</u>.

Attached to the form the social studies teachers received was this post-it-note from the principal:

> 7th grade social studies--
>
> This is a concern form from Parent Council that was clarified (as on post-it-note[14]) after I brought it back to them for comment.
>
> By the end [of the last Parent Council meeting] a couple of parents defended [International Fair] beautifully. My question is --

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[13]A teacher challenged this by asking "how many?" The parents estimated that four or five of them had heard five complaints each, for an estimated total of "from 20 to 25." I judged this at the time to be a gross exaggeration but have no direct evidence to counter it.

[14]The parents' post-it had the following written on it:

> Not meant to be negative; Parent mtg. may help; Not a problem on all teams; Consistency team to team; Individual grades vs. group grades

> Would a 7th grade social studies teacher skip team [meeting] time [next] Monday morning at 10:00 to give a background on International Fair to Parent Council and comment? There will be lots of support [for International Fair] and this is INFORMATIONAL, not defensive.
>
> Thanks, Molly

In this formal way parents brought forward their ideas for changing the keystone of the interdisciplinary curriculum invented by the 7th grade teachers. Their four points suggest changes in scope of content and assignments, basis for grading, and, indirectly, the underlying goals of the entire activity. This was the most direct and explicit challenge to the professional judgment of Yorkton Middle School teachers I encountered during my two years at the school. The teachers reacted swiftly and purposefully.

After receiving this formal complaint from the parents, via their principal, the three social studies teachers planned a joint presentation involving all of them for the following Monday (three days before the Fair happened.) Their preparations were extensive, each rehearsing carefully his or her role in the meeting. Shortly after 10 am on the following Monday the ten members of Parent Council present that day walked into one of the three teachers' room which had been cleaned and arranged to display various Fair-related projects. The walls were covered with posters, body silhouettes, and flags; other posters were propped on tables and desks for the parents' benefit.

One social studies teacher, Aaron Ricketts, originator of the International Fair concept, led off. He seemed a bit nervous, and spoke very briefly from an outline. Then he showed a 4-minute local television news clip which had reported the previous year's Fair. The parents enjoyed the scenes, laughing or smiling during some segments; they turned to one another an

commented throughout the video. However, Shirley Lutz, sharpest of the Fair critics on Parent Council, never changed her rather grim expression.

Renee Brockoff, the next teacher to speak, commented that "Jessica in the video" was one of her LD students last year, and that the teachers are reaching kids with International Fair "...in so many ways." She went on to describe and show the common assignments specified in the Fair brochure given to students, responding to the complaint regarding consistency (this was dealt with in several ways during the course of the meeting.) She explained the way teachers stage the assignments, give help and feedback to students, and orchestrate "show and tell" critique sessions where students and teachers give suggestions for improving drafts of work. Renee also touched on their International Fair goal of fostering "group dynamics," such as emphasizing positive rather than negative comments and suggestions, as well as skills like "encouraging, showing, and sharing."

One of the parents, Peggy Cox, asked about minimum standards and grading. Renee responded that there was the minimum of 17 required assignments, and the grading of each was subjective. Another parent, Carolyn Bailey, asked what level of involvement teachers expected. Henry Lawson, the third social studies teacher, explained they welcomed parent support and guidance in the International Fair. While some parents became "overzealous" they need parent involvement, he said. Aaron added, "...but don't [you] do it <u>for</u> them [the students]." Pat Smith, another of the parent critics of International Fair, retorted that parents aren't clear on what is allowed and not allowed. For example, she said, there was confusion over whether lamination of materials was permitted in the booths. Renee interjected her thinking about keeping spending low for projects and booths. She showed the parents a "good but inexpensive" diorama in her

room. Students didn't need to go to toy stores to buy things for such a display, she said; they could be creative by using materials at hand, like the clothes pins representing people in the diorama, or old clothes for costumes worn in the booths.

Henry Lawson took the floor for his closing part of the teacher presentation. Instead of responding directly to the parents' four "concerns," he addressed the teachers' view of the educational value of the International Fair. He emphasized its interdisciplinary connections as well as its group skill goals, and the connection of social problem solving skills (he used the term "getting along skills") in out of school workplace settings. He also emphasized students' use of technology in gathering and displaying information, comparing a project done five years ago with one done this year with computer-generated graphs and word processed text. Creativity and teamwork were key educational benefits of this part of the curriculum, he added.

Henry turned again to teachers' perceptions of parent involvement: He viewed parent guidance and support of their children in International Fair as one of its distinct positive outcomes, and the teachers seek even more of it. Aaron chimed in, "...but not actually doing the work." Peggy Cox, a parent, asked pointedly, is that written [in the documents provided students and parents]?" Carolyn Bailey said, "Personally I think parents and students working together is great. But it [kind of involvement and level of expectations] has to be dealt with." Renee spoke up: "...it varies. Some parents want to relive their childhood [by doing their children's work]!" Pat Smith, another parent, told of parents' expectations for quality of booths being very high, and the peer pressure among adults who want their kids' booths to compare favorably with others'.

After some positive comments about the impact of International Fair on children of two of the parents at the meeting, Shirley Lutz, the harshest critic of the Fair, pointed at the list of 17

required assignments and asked, accusingly "Have you added some from last year?" Aaron pointed out that nothing had been added during the last two years. Shirley asked if teachers had sought input from parents on the assignments; the teachers didn't answer directly, with Renee explaining that "...it all comes down to 5 or 6 requirements per kid [given the division of labor within groups]. That's about one each month. Is that too many?" Shirley answered: "I thought it was too much [last year her son was a 7th grader]. The artifacts are hard to find." Henry interjected that many groups use pictures, rather than the artifacts themselves. Shirley said, "I wish I had known that--I was knocking myself out on that [requirement last year]. Aaron broke in: "Listen to what you're saying: 'You were....' Let him do it!" Shirley, not willing to back down, said "...my networks were bigger [than her son's last year][15].

Following this exchange there was some discussion of the extra help during and after school and on Saturdays provided for Fair assignments, as well as the need for a 7th grade parents' orientation session in October to communicate clearly the goals, process, and level of expectations for parents' involvement in International Fair. Near the end of the meeting Pat Smith, one of the Fair critics among the parents, exclaimed, "I'm going home and ream my daughter. She didn't tell me this stuff, like help in English...." The meeting ended with the parents generally believing that issues had been clarified and they'd received some information

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[15]I discovered later that this rather sharp exchange between the parent, Shirley Lutz, and the teacher, Aaron Ricketts, had a history. Shirley's son was in Aaron's class last year. Shirley is one of the Parent Council members most distressed at the demise of ability grouping and the gifted program at Yorkton, and believed strongly that her son was gifted. During the previous year she'd done a lot of her son's work, including that in the Fair, and Aaron knew it. Aaron also thought her son was not at all gifted academically ("a B level student", he told me later), a judgment corraborated by one of the boy's 6th grade teachers.

counter to what they'd assumed. The exception seemed to be Shirley Lutz.

Outcomes of the Parents' Attempts to Influence the Fair

Parents' concerns and complaints about the International Fair had been accumulating for a long period; the Parent Council meeting with the 7th grade social studies teachers was only the formal manifestation that focussed into a single event these parents' attempts to change the course of the Fair. This meeting was the first and only one I observed in which a group of parents and a group of teachers discussed curricular issues with the possibility of changing the way teachers did their work. Heretofore the Parent Council meetings occurred with only the principal, Molly, or one of her assistants, present, with the exception of one or two individual teachers coming in with brief, non-curricular items of business. The parent meetings were ostensibly open to teachers, but were not scheduled at times convenient for their participation, occurring during either class instruction or teacher team meeting times.

During the meeting just described, the parents pushed their agenda for changing the International Fair in the four points of the written "concern form" as well as through questioning and arguments with the teachers during the meeting and elsewhere. They urged changing from group-based to individual grades, lessening the extent of assignments and amount of work, having all teachers adopt the same requirements and grading procedures for consistency's sake, and scaling down the scope of the entire activity. The teachers responded by conveying information the parents lacked about the nature of assignments and extent of support for students, to accomplish them both in and outside class time. They stressed their goals for the activity, and gave specific examples of how they were achieved. They clarified grading processes, and

reasons for differences among teachers.

The three principal results of the meeting and other attempts by parents to change the International Fair were seen during next year's Fair. First, the teachers organized and carried out a very successful information meeting in October, 1994, in which information was given directly to more than 200 parents rather than trusting children to convey it. Discussion of particular assignments and booth specifications, and clarification of expected parent roles, was also accomplished during this meeting. Second, the teachers reduced the competition for "best booths" by eliminating the ten trophies. Third, the teachers tightened up their rules proscribing parents' from playing major roles in setting up booths before the Fair; the teachers reported after the 1995 Fair this problem was minimal, with the students doing this work by themselves.

Each change appears to be an example of the teachers' maintaining and perhaps increasing their influence over the curriculum, and reducing the likelihood of what they viewed as parent "over involvement" in the Fair. The Fall 1995 orientation meeting functioned to open another communication channel so that teachers could explain their expectations for parent involvement and counter tendencies for parents to do their children's work for them or become competitive about booths. It also permitted the teachers to outline their goals and rationale for the activity, deflecting potential criticism that might occur because of misperception or lack of clear information.

Eliminating trophies for booths and prohibiting parents from setting up booths were both intended to decrease parents' competitiveness with one another in the Fair context, and indirectly aimed to lessen the direct role some parents took in doing students' work for them, rather than with them. The teachers had talked often prior to the Parent Council meeting about parents

going too far in attempting to win prizes for their children by assembling expensive and elaborate booths--ones often impossible for the students themselves to create and construct--and the teachers were aware that some parents stepped in to do their children's assignments for them, as shown by the exchange between Aaron Ricketts and Shirley Lutz in the meeting.

By manipulating these two rules governing the Fair, the teachers increased the distance between direct parent involvement and the desired student projects and activities. This control over rules is an example of what I have termed "boundary maintenance" of teachers over their curricular prerogatives (Ehman 1995b). In the largest sense, the parents attempting to influence the curriculum of the International Fair lost out in this effort, and the teachers won. The teachers willingly improved their communication of expectations to the parents, hoping to enlist them further in curriculum-supportive roles, but changed neither their goals nor the group-based nature of the assignments and grading in response to the activist parents' urgings to change them. They changed rules in order to buffer children from their parents' "over involvement" in assignments and booth production. Finally, if the overall scope and intensity of the Fair changed at all, it was broadened and heightened, not reduced.

Different Roles, Different Goals

One important difference between parents' and teachers' views of how the International Fair should be conducted was the gap between the goals of those holding the two roles. Parents ultimately valued the needs and learning of their children, as individuals, over the teachers' vision of group-based outcomes. While the teachers portrayed as important Fair outcomes group problem solving, decision making, and even conflict resolution, and therefore grouped the

students in order to achieve an ability level mixture and issued the same grades for each member of the groups, some parents wanted their children to be able to work with their friends, and to receive individual, differentiated grades based on their relative contribution to the projects. Parents wanted what they viewed as best for their child; teachers believed they were acting in the interest of the many.

This issue was played out within the Parent Council as well. The parents were quite aware, intellectually, of the difference. While working on their "vision statement" the Council's chairperson, Jeanette Rankin, pointed out: "We can't think we're writing it for our 8th graders, but only for an 8th grader." Pat Smith responded that "...a lot of parents care only about their kids, not others." In spite of this clear awareness of the distinction between acting in the interests of the students collectively and their children individually, all of the parents I observed and interviewed eventually acted at times with their own child's interests foremost.

Another difference in goals between parents and teachers, while more muted in the International Fair discourse, was nevertheless present. Some of the Parent Council members viewed the goals and activities of the Fair as typifying a watering down ("dumbing down" was a favorite phrase of Shirley Lutz and others during Parent Council meetings) of the academic rigor of the curriculum they viewed as essential in the education of their children. Teachers saw as essential several goals in their assignments: skills in relating to and working with others, not necessarily close friends; seeking, displaying, and interpreting information; and crossing discipline lines to construct knowledge. None of these were embraced by the parents still grieving over the loss of tracking and the separate honors classes, where their children had the opportunity to show off their study skills and high standardized test scores. Two parent members

of the Parent Council most vocal about what they viewed as the fundamental curricular mistake of detracking and eliminating honors program, were also those bringing forward concerns about the International Fair--Pat Smith and Shirley Lutz. Thus, the particular criticisms of the Fair curriculum were played out against the broader backdrop of criticism of broad curriculum directions being taken in Yorkton Middle School.

Teachers' Views of Parental Over involvement

Parents and teachers sought to insulate the children from the influence of the other. Parents saw themselves as their child's "first teacher," and when International Fair assignments seemed too difficult or requiring too much effort, they either helped their children do the work (sometimes completely taking over responsibilities, in the views of teachers), or tried to influence teachers to change the assignments. One teacher I interviewed, Beth Crowless, a language arts teacher and one of the three 7th grade team leaders, saw the mothers as protecting their children from the dangers of school, just as a mother bear protects her cubs. Beth explained to me that it is mostly mothers who are involved in the school. She talked about the implicit threat her work as a teacher poses to mothers, referring to her own teaching: "...there is a kind of mothering work that goes on...." "And don't forget I'm a mother [too] and I see it all." She talked about the "nurturing" she does with students, with some parents liking that and some not. She referred to negative opinions from the 1990 parent survey about the school, and attributed them to "the mother-bear instinct" at work as the result of mistrust of the school:

...the 6th graders come to us and all of a sudden they leave that little secure elementary

> school and they come into this big bad junior high.... I don't know, being in the transition, we're keeping things from their parents....

Beth referred again to ". .the mother bear coming out" in another interview a month later. It is obviously a clear image in her mind, the protective mother hovering over the child in the face of threats from teachers and the school as a whole.

Another interpretation of this general phenomenon is the struggle over the goal of childrens' increasing independence. An explicit part of the curriculum of the International Fair is promoting student independence of thought and action. While the parents are invited to participate in collecting materials and creating booths, the teachers also communicate expectations and enact formal rules proscribing parents' attempts to "do the childrens' work for them." This was the clear agenda in the dialogue between Aaron Ricketts and Shirley Lutz in the Parent Council meeting.

Teachers also viewed some parents as trying to play out old scenes from their own schooling, vicariously, by working with their children on the booths. This interpretation leaves aside the parents' supportive role--they are no longer seen as interested in promoting and helping their child's learning, but rather as a competitor with other parents, perhaps once schoolmates, in excelling in school. Winning booth trophies was important to some parents above and beyond what it might have signified for student learning and accomplishments. This manifested itself particularly in the actions of Pat Smith of the Parent Council group. During the International Fair it was she who argued vociferously for repositioning her daughter's booth to a large, strategic corner to heighten its effect and attractiveness. It was she who proudly announced the winning of the trophy to all who would listen in the weeks following the event. And it was her

daughter's group who complained to teachers that they felt pushed aside in the booth by Pat, who also was perceived as unpleasant to them. As the teacher, Renee Brockoff, astutely commented during the Parent Council meeting: "Some parents want to relive their childhood." Another way of interpreting this is that the parents were trying to construct a curriculum of their own, for themselves--one with their own goals, rules, and venues--separate from that of the school and their children.

One last interpretation is mine alone. What teachers viewed as "over involvement" might have stemmed in part because some of the parents were themselves former teachers as well. I believe that for some of these women the two roles blurred and perhaps merged. Pat Smith had been a business teacher for many years; during this study she volunteered many hours in the school office. Jeanette Rankin, chairperson of the Parent Council, had been a teacher. Shirley Lutz, while not a trained teacher, believed herself an important educator in the school, sponsoring and teaching in the "Odyssey of the Mind" program. Two other parents on the Council had taught or were now teaching. The president of the PTO was also a teacher in an adjacent school district.

Therefore, these parents were also experienced teachers. While they had the interests of their individual children closest to heart, they also believed they shared the expertise and values of the teachers they now confronted over the curriculum. It was fascinating to watch as the formally sanctioned professionals, the teachers, defended the boundaries separating themselves from the laypersons, in spite of the considerable teaching experience of the laity. The latter made it clear in conversations among themselves (but never directly to the teachers or the principals, as far as I ever heard) they believed their views of the curriculum as professional educators was the

equal of the regular Yorkton teachers--and perhaps better! Nevertheless, in the contest of power relationships played out in this case study, it was the teachers whose views prevailed.

Supportive, Activist, or Partnership Parent Involvement in the Curriculum?

The introduction of this paper outlined a perhaps oversimplified trichotomy of parent involvement categories. The first orientation is toward supportive parent involvement, involving a productive partnership with teachers, in which the latter leads and the parent follows, all in the interest of promoting student learning. Another view has parents vying with professional educators for power over the education of their children. Dissent and, if necessary, conflict are ingredients of this more active parent role, and are aimed at influencing the decision making in schools. The experience and special training of professional educators is not seen as justification for their dominance over schooling, and parents are seen as equals to teachers in voice and power. Avoiding conflict or refusing to change imbalances in power between parents and professionals is seen as undermining "real educational transformation" (Fine 1993, 684).

The third position is Swap's "partnership model." Here parents take supportive roles, but are respected and treated as equals in school decision-making. Conflict and power struggles are not a necessary condition for school improvement, as Fine argues--Swap sees parents working productively and actively with teachers and other school professionals without the inevitability of debilitating tension and struggle.

In the case of Yorkton's International Fair, and the attempt by some parents to change curricular aspects of this event, the principal and teachers were successful in maintaining the boundary between themselves and the parents. The Parent Council "concern form" and

subsequent meeting with the social studies teachers introduced, in Swap's terms, "...conflict into the schools and thereby create[d] distress and defensiveness" (1993, 18). However, in this case, the principal and teachers did not resort to what Lightfoot referred to as "...contrived occasions that symbolically affirm the idealized parent-school relationship but rarely provide the chance for authentic interaction" (1978, 27-28). Instead, from an activist stance, the parents confronted the teachers with their grievances and requests for change in a forum including sharp exchanges of views, disagreements, and some conflict. The process appeared to be "authentic" even though the teachers held sway in the end.

From their perspective, the teachers acknowledged the legitimacy of the parents' views and their stake in the curricular questions by responding with a carefully prepared presentation, trying not to be defensive. Neither did they shrink from blunt exchanges with the parents when they thought they were wrong. In allowing the parents to give voice to their concerns and taking the ideas seriously, the teachers accepted these parents as equals--momentarily. When the Fair was held, however, the decisions showed the ultimate power on the professional educators' side of the boundary. This case, then, falls well short of Swap's partnership model.

As I have shown elsewhere in analyzing other conflict over the school's curriculum between parents and the school's staff, it is possible that the parents can exert enough influence to reverse important curriculum-related decisions related to the overall school program (Ehman 1995b). Two or three months before the events described in this case, intense pressure by members of the Parent Council resulted in the school's administration withdrawing formal affiliation with the Coalition of Essential Schools, and foregoing substantial state funding that heretofore had helped underwrite their restructuring efforts. Yet the case of the conflict over the

curriculum of the International Fair resulted only in improved communication between teachers and parents about expectations for parent involvement--and teacher-made rules to limit what the teachers viewed as "over involvement."

Appendix A: International Fair Assignment Timetable, 1993-94

1. Costumes/colors of the country. Name tags. 2/28

2. Flag at least as large as a poster board -- by Christmas vacation

3. Three maps -- one showing your country in relation to the rest of the world, the other two your choice. Distribution, resource, product, climate, etc. 1/30

4. Report -- Information will be given on what areas the report should cover. 2/28 [The specifications for this report varied; one social studies teacher used an "ABC" format, with one item for each letter of the alphabet--he'd learned this in a teacher workshop in Florida--and the other two social studies teachers required narrative reports with illustrations. Both variations involved a detailed, two-page outline of expectations]

5. Magazine, newspaper, travel book -- two items. 1/30 and 2/28

6. Sell two food items from your country. (Choose the recipes). 1/29

7. Artifacts/souvenirs. 2/28

8. Decorate booth. 3/10

9. Activity/game. 1/28

10. Time line showing the major events in the history of your country. 2/15

11. Three types of graphs, on one poster board, showing information about your country. Bar graphs, pie graphs, pictograph. Examples--temperature, rainfall, population, etc.

12. Write letters seeking information about your country from Foreign Representatives and other sources. 11/12

13. See a pen pal. 11/29

14. Have examples of money or currency. This could be photocopied. 1/28

15. Diorama/habitat. 2/28

16. Examples of art, literature, music.

17. Pass a test about your country. 3/12

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